

Fixity and Fluidity

History, Politics and Culture of North East India

Edited by

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The Politics of Religious Change in North-east India

DAVID VUMLALLIAN ZOU



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The Politics of Religious Change in North-east India

DAVID VUMLALLIAN ZOU

Tribal indigenous peoples have a dominant presence in the highlands, and an undeniable existence in the lowlands of the north-east in contemporary India. Since the dawn of historical times, paddy states in the river valleys expended much effort on devising handles by which to grab various stateless populations. At once described as “shy” and “wild,” these peoples had a long history of evading different state regimes – paddy state, colonial state, or nation-state. In fact, the writ of the pre-colonial states had little effect on hill populations till the British Raj fought its way into the hill to incorporate one “tribe” after another. Exposure to colonial contact produced different outcomes for hill tribes with distinctive memories and local cosmologies. Since the early nineteenth century, such encounters resulted in religious change that gained momentum in the mid-twentieth century in many hill areas. Forged by the educated elite, a colonial modernity emerged from this historical process under colonial conditions. Having dislodged the old chiefdom, the new elite have been slowly coming to terms with an overlapping “tribal” peoplehood and state citizenship.

HISTORICAL PARALLELS WITHIN THE NORTH-EAST

This paper is a synthetic essay that looks at the role of religious change in state formation as a vantage point for mapping a complex borderland history. It focuses on multiple linkages connecting pre-colonial state projects, contemporary nation-building, the process of religious change, and the emergence of colonial modernity. The relationship of pre-colonial paddy states in the Irrawaddy, Barak, Brahmaputra, and Imphal valleys with the surrounding hill peoples often contributed to either the durability or vulnerability of their projects of rule. Tribal hill peoples asserted their independence whenever the authority of paddy states waned. The balance of power sometimes tilted in favour of hill chiefs. By virtue of superior arms, the British Raj stepped into the shoes of pre-colonial regimes in the north-eastern region. They perfected the imperial repertoire of indirect rule in the tribal hill areas where they identified or invented traditional institutions of chieftainship or its equivalents. In the pre-colonial era, top-down religious change from local to Indic belief-systems was mostly confined to settled wet-rice cultivators and Sanskritizing elites in the irrigated valleys of the Brahmaputra, the Barak, the Gumti-Haorah and the Imphal rivers. Under colonial

rule, bottom-up conversion to Judeo-Christian faith largely occurred among *jhum* cultivators (especially among slaves, women and the youth) in the hill areas such as the Naga, Jaintia-Khasi, Garo and the Lushai hills.

I do not treat religious ideology as a determined superstructure that merely reflects a determining material base. Although religious change is not an autonomous agent, it sometimes served as a catalyst for new political possibilities. Over the long-term, unique historical constellations converged to establish the dominance of particular belief systems for various social groups. Religious change was not simply a tool of political legitimacy for Sanskritizing princes; it can equally carve out new political pathways for dominated social groups. This was borne out by the political role of the Vaishnava sect of Moamarias in the downfall of the Ahom state, and also in the rise of a predominantly Christian educated elites who effectively challenged hereditary or nominated chiefs in the Sixth Schedule areas of republican India. In core areas of state-building – both paddy or colonial states – Sanskritization and Modernization did not necessarily lead to the secularization of minds or the retreat of religion. Instead of discretely studying particular religious changes as bounded isolates, a synthetic gaze can reveal broader patterns of connected changes. New belief systems flourished only by working with the grain of social and political changes in new locales.

THE DAWN OF DEITIES BEFORE WORLD RELIGIONS

The oldest varieties of religion in north-east India consisted of animistic rituals and goddess cults worshipped with either animal or human sacrifices, or both. Goddess Kesai Khati of ancient Sadiya in Upper Assam was “the eater of raw flesh.”¹ Similar fertility goddesses of fierce description had existed among the Tripuris, Kacharis, Koches, Jaintias, etc.

“Headhunting” ritual in the hills was in many ways associated with fertility cults and beliefs. The encounter of tribal religions in Assam and Bengal with Indic religions appeared to have taken the form of late Tantric Buddhism² and Shakta Hinduism.

Historian S.K. Bhuyan asserted that Hindu and Buddhist advocates not only tolerated, but legitimised “the rites of aboriginal tribes, read an esoteric meaning in them, and absorb them....”³

SHAKTA AHOMS IN THE LATE 17TH CENTURY

In the late seventeenth century, the Ahoms embraced Shaktism and “considered Vaishnavism to be too passive and mild to be suitable for a ruling class who had to maintain their domination by the force of arms.”⁴

Shaktism superbly suited the needs of the elite Ahom militia, and it enabled them to exclude or include outsiders as required, and legitimize their alien rule over their caste-differentiated subjects.

The fierce and violent aspects of Shakti goddesses might serve to exclude and warn potential enemies or rebellious tribes. The image of a benign Vaishnavite god was hardly suited to produce such an impression of power.

In medieval Assam, Shaktism did a better job at winning the favour of princes than the hearts of the people. This left ample room for the emergence of popular religiosity and a missionary sect that would meet the needs of the lower orders.

During the sixteenth century, a serious rival of aristocratic Shaktism had risen in the form of popular Vaishnavism preached by Sankardev (1449-1568). He had his work cut out to tame and purge "the rude and manly savagery of Tantric worship and animism"⁵ that lurked behind Shaktism in Assam.

Unlike Shaktism tied to its royal patrons, Vaishnavism was a proselytizing religion with open arms to all caste groups. A Sudra named Anirudha became Sankardev's disciple, and founded a new Vaishnava sect whose adherents came to be known as Moamarias.⁶ They turned into a political force that struck the Ahom state with fatal consequences during the eighteenth century. Coming to terms with new political facts, persecutor Ahom state soon pragmatically turned into Vaishnava patrons.

VAISHNAVISM IN 18TH CENTURY MANIPUR

Beyond the Brahmaputra valley, Vaishnava Brahmins fanned out into the courts of Manipur and Cachar throughout the eighteenth century. Vaishnavism turned full circle; a sect that originated as a popular movement in the Brahmaputra valley ended up as the religion of royalty in the Imphal and Barak valleys.

Vaishnava Brahmins traced back the pedigree of Ningthouja princes in Manipur to the epic hero Arjun. Likewise, the Cachar raja was announced in 1790 as the descendants of Bhim, the hero of Mahabharata.

Even as the hill peoples of Manipur came under tighter state control in the eighteenth century,⁷ the process of Sanskritization in the Imphal valley appeared to widen the cultural distance between the caste-acquiring valley people and the "polluted" hill people on the one hand, and religious tension between Vaishnava Hindu converts and adherents of the old Meitei religion (*Sanamahi*) on the other hand.

Like their Tai-Ahom counterparts in Assam, princes in Manipur used a well-established device for claiming high-status identity through genealogical

fictions with imagined Indo-Aryan ancestors. The royal titles of Meitei kings mirrored shifts in cultural orientations from Sinic to Indic influences.

Names of Meitei princes used to evoke southeast Asian connections. King Kyamba, for instance, meant “conqueror of Kyam”, a Shan principality in Upper Burma. After the conversion of the first Meitei king to Hinduism in 1704, Indo-Persian and Indo-Aryan surnames such as Singh, Chandra, or Garib Niwaz became all the rage in Manipur.

The top-down process of religious change in pre-colonial Manipur is relatively well-documented in scribal sources (*puyas*). During the eighteenth century, the exodus of literate Brahmins from Mughal Bengal into borderland states (such as Cachar and Manipur) gave an impetus to the conversion of local princes to the Brahmanical fold. Fleeing a tottering Mughal political order, several mendicant Brahmins arrived at the court of Manipur in small groups of eleven or twenty-two throughout the eighteenth century C.E.⁸

As ritual experts, immigrant Brahmins had much to offer to their new patrons such as Garib Niwaz. Though the old faith in forest spirits was not fallacious any more than the new Hindu belief was perfect, embracing Brahmanism could lend political legitimacy to a local ruler in the eyes of his internal and external enemies. As a cultural resource, it gave ambitious princes access to respectable genealogies going back to epic heroes of Sanskrit classics and impressive rituals that lent mystique to Meitei kingship.

Ascending the throne as Mayampa, Pamheiba acquired a Persian title as Garib Niwaz (“kind to the poor”) and a Hindu title as Manipureswar (“cow protector”). He was the first Meitei king to claim the title of *Maharaja* instead of the traditional *Ningthem*.⁹ The embrace of Brahmanism expanded and intensified the traffic of people (pilgrims & priests), ideas and goods between the Gangetic core and the Imphal valley.

The *Court Chronicles* registers that King Charai Rongba had already taken “the name of a Hindu *lai*” or god (*laiming loubu*)¹⁰ before him. “To take the name of a god” — or a different god — is a pre-modern way of understanding “conversion.” A Brahmin from Puri initiated him into the new faith. Though Charai Rongba professed Vaishnavite beliefs, he practiced them as an additive component without giving up his old ancestral religion, *Sanamahi*.

For Garib Niwaz, however, Vaishnava Hinduism was *the* religion — worthy of state patronage. Won over by the guru Shanti Gopal Das, King Garibniwas converted to Vaishnavite Hinduism in 1717. This ignited a missionary enthusiasm directed at the old Meitei religion. The outcome of the tension between the two belief systems varied over time. Abodes of some gods or goddesses were destroyed, others retained distinct local identities as forest deities (*umang lai*)¹¹, and yet some came to be identified with Hindu deities (Kabui, 255). As tropical

forests receded before an expanding agrarian frontier at Imphal and Samsok (in the Kabaw valley), the forest spirits increasingly appeared remote to the concerns of sedentary souls. In the fourteenth year of his reign, Garib Niwaz "declared that nine *Umang lais*... were not be regarded as *lais* and all their shrines demolished."¹² In cleansing the then existing pluralistic ethos, Garib Niwaz destroyed images of the *Sanamahi* deities (being the most revered of the *Umang lais*), and went on to bury them at Mongbahanba.¹³

If Brahmin migration served as an external stimulus, agrarian expansion at the cost of forests and the need of Ningthouja dynasty for political legitimacy provided the immediate contexts for Meitei conversion to Vaishnavism in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ In the forested hills, however, no Brahmin ventured there; *jhum* cycles enabled the renewal of forest covers that embodied forest spirits; and tribal chiefs could just get by without deep genealogies.

For the moment, the freshly titled Maharajas revelled in their acquired distance from their rustic hill neighbours as a means of gaining more social respectability. Consequently, hill resentment would later turn this attitude on its own heads; but that was still in the future.

POLITICAL CONTEXT: THE BURMESE AND THE BRITISH

Kon-baung Burma (1752-1885) had been a regional hegemon in Arakan (Rakhine), Assam and Manipur (Kathe). Rebelling against the Ahoms, Maomarias (a sect of popular Vaishnavism) sought the help of Burma. General Bandula, "the greatest of all Burmese generals,"¹⁵ defeated the ruling Ahom king in 1822. And it "marked the extinction of Ahom authority in Assam."¹⁶

The first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) changed the fate of India's north-east, whose political history decisively gravitated towards British Bengal (and later republican India) while moving away from its historical connections with Southeast Asia.

An expanding East India Company at Bengal frequently clashed with Kon-baung Burma which wielded enormous influence in what is today north-east India. The British stepped into the shoes of the Kon-baung since Burma's prestige took a beating at the end of the first Anglo-Burmese War.

MISSIONARIES IN BRITISH ASSAM

Various Christian missionaries followed the British flag in its ascent unto the hills. The colonial state and the Christian missionaries shared a "civilising mission" even if they differed on how to bring about the desired "improvements" for their subjects or converts.

While colonial indirect rule expended its energies on law and order, the missionaries were entrusted with schools, health care and proselytization. The frontiers of the state and of religion tended to converge here throughout the nineteenth century. The history of Christian conversion is at the heart of unprecedented transformations that convulsed various communities across the region.

At the start of colonial contact, Sanskritic and later Islamic religious frontiers had been moving eastward for several centuries in what is now north-east India. Both these world religions attracted adherents in the lowlands, especially among the builders of paddy states in the Brahmaputra, Barak, Imphal and Gumti-Haorah valleys based on wet-rice cultivation. Neither of Indic nor Islamic civilizations managed to climb up the hills where people practised the ubiquitous monsoon religion of spirit cults and subsisted on clearing hillsides of inferior soil.

It was the endeavours of two Protestant sects that made present-day Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram into predominantly Christian belts. Of course, there were other missionary players in the region such as the Roman Catholic, the Anglican Church, the British Baptists, the New Zealand Baptists, the Gossner Lutherans, the Salvation Army, the Seventh Day Adventists, the United Pentecostals, etc. But viewed solely in terms of cultural impact on local societies, two Protestant missions (American Baptists and the Welsh Calvinists) and the Roman Catholic mission stood out from the rest.

The earliest writings on the church in north-east India appeared as celebratory accounts of particular sects among different peoples connected with their mission. Mission histories of particular sects have been written by missionaries themselves for the consumption of donors and church members. But from the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, a handful of scholars attempted to explain Christian conversion among the hill peoples by being more attentive to the social context and historical contingencies.

What were the mechanisms of a cultural process at once as personal and political as religious conversion? Some of the above questions have been resolved by Richard M. Eaton (1984) in his influential article on Naga conversion.¹⁷ With a breath of intellectual outlook, Eaton considered conversion as an aspect of cultural change that ensued from the expanding frontiers of agrarian states from the Gangetic core into the jungles of eastern Bengal and western Punjab. In the east, indigenous populations of Bengal had been incorporated into lettered religious traditions we now call Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic. Yet there still remained certain interior pockets that succumbed to colonial conquest and a literate religion. For Eaton, a study of Naga conversion may

suggest "how previous aboriginals of India might, in earlier epochs, have acculturated to Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam."

EARLY CONVERTS IN THE LUSHAI HILLS

In the Lushai hills, *bawih*s (domestic slaves of chiefs)¹⁸ and *khawhrings* (women accused of evil eye) were particularly receptive to Christian conversion. No wonder that many *khawhring* women became "wives of Christian workers and they are none the worse."¹⁹ Unless the evil eye is gender-bias, the mere existence of this folk belief complex is not enough to explain why certain social groups left an old belief system to embrace religious change.

Slaves girls and boys fled their masters to the Welsh missionary headquarters at Aizawl, and they represented a large section of the early Christian converts. A *Bawih* census report in 1923 arrived at the figure of 1426 slave households in the Lushai hills. Dr. Peter Fraser was a medical missionary at Aizawl who championed the cause of the *bawih* abolition. He paid dearly with his missionary career for this initiative. Between 1909 and 1912, slaves girls who sought his support complained of sexual harassment and elderly women were vulnerable to physical violence from *bawih*-owing Lushai chiefs. The *bawih*s were the most likely persons to see a prospect for spiritual and social redemption in the egalitarian message of Christian missionaries. Many slave boys availed themselves of missionary schools, and transformed into respected leaders of Christian Mizos and even the whole Mizo community. As a young *bawih*, Mr. Dohnuna escaped his chief's village to urban Aizawl where he attended the missionary school, and earned enough cash wage to redeem himself. He converted to the new faith, became a successful shopkeeper, a church elder, an enterprenuer who invested in weaving machine, and later a salaried missionary to southern Manipur.²⁰ A popular Mizo Christian hymn composed by an educated ex-*bawih*, Thanga (born 1883), was dedicated to the praise of abolitionist *Pathian*, the pre-Christian Mizo deity who came to be identified with Judeo-Christian God in a hymn, "Aw Lalpa, Chungnung ber, kan fak hle a che!":

Oh most exalted Lord, we praise you!
You are the Living and Almighty *Pathian*;
The friend of the oppressed, *bawih*, sufferers and sinners;
The Chief, Dad and *Pathian* of orphans and paupers.²¹

The ex-*bawih* composer represented the Judeo-Christian God as an exalted Abolitionist, suggesting that he was none other than *Pathian* (the clan deity of the powerful Sailo chiefs) and a *Lal* (Chief) who owned no slaves. Such an

the struggle between traditional chiefs and modernising elites played out in the overlap of authority between the District Council and the cornered Chiefs. Political outcomes varied from the abolition to tolerance of chieftdom by democratising Councils under the Sixth Schedule.

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